

POVERTY PROBLEMS FOR A PATRIOT PARLIAMENT.

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When planning the submission of certain suggestions as to Irish social legislation, designed to combat the evil of poverty, I conjectured that when the time arrived for doing so the battle flags would have been furled and tri-colours, whether of red, white and blue, or orange, green and white, would have ceased to serve as *oriflammes* to the people of Ireland. However, although the Irish Senate has not yet entered on its legislative stride I still hope that an Irish Constitution will soon be evolved, within which every element of class, creed and thought will find expression for their respective views, and Christ's poor especially some eloquent and energetic advocates.

To some it may appear futile to enter on a discussion at present during the political maelstrom now raging as to problems needing calm thinking in a placid atmosphere. To such I would say: Military plans are seldom devised on the battlefield, and the business of societies, such as ours, is to educate our members and the Irish people at large as to the plans most advisable to adopt when the hour arrives for legislative action. For it must be remembered that the force of well-considered popular opinion, rather than the activity or good will of any political administration, is mainly responsible for the enactment of legislative measures of a socially beneficent character. Therefore the sooner the popular demand is heard the quicker will come legislative response.

If the economic and social ills of Ireland are to be dealt with by legislation within a reasonable period, the co-operation of every organisation, guided by Christian and patriotic principles, will be urgently needed. In order to facilitate such constructive legislation my first proposal would be

The Establishment of a Legislative Inquiry Commission.

This Commission would investigate the need and feasibility of suggested reforms. It would secure early and effective analysis, and thus accelerate early legislation on subjects which the popular will has decisively declared as ripe for gathering in

the Statute Book. Schemes approved of by this Commission should therefore be adopted and dealt with as Government measures. Rejected schemes would have to rely on private initiative and the strength of its Parliamentary supporters.

The removal of the plague of poverty, which is the fountain-source of much of our national ills, physical and moral, should be, to my mind, the primal work of an Irish administration. The Divine Master once said: "The poor you have always with you." Therefore I cherish no idle visions of an Ireland of the future fitting to the appellation of "a land flowing with milk and honey," where toil and poverty alike shall cease to exist.

But I do sincerely believe that, given the good will of all classes, an era may yet arrive when absolute destitution, whether affecting adult or child, shall be unknown, and employment for willing workers will be ever abundant.

Assuming therefore that a Legislative Inquiry Commission were appointed, I would plead special urgency for the consideration of proposals dealing with

Poverty: Its Causes and Effects, and Measures to Alleviate It.

In order to treat the matter scientifically we would need to distinguish between *temporary* poverty and *permanent* destitution—temporary poverty being mainly the result of sickness or unemployment, while permanent destitution is chiefly due to infirmity, old age or widowhood. I would therefore contribute a few brief suggestions as to measures which might be adopted by State and Civic organisation to grapple with those ills. My main object in so doing is not so much to secure your approval of my proposals as to stimulate original thinking, as to the best means of arriving at a satisfactory solution of the problems dealt with, by those who may not agree with either my premises or objective.

Temporary poverty, caused by unemployment, will first engage our attention, and no solution, no matter how divergent from present-day systems, should be ignored, in order to arrive at such a permanent organisation of industry as would enable all workers to enter into those avenues of employment which would afford them a regular wage income sufficient to provide for themselves and their dependents, so as to enable them to live a life of at least simple happiness, due to all creatures made in the image of God.

For the week ending April 17th, 1922, 45,472 persons were registered as unemployed in the twenty-six counties known as Southern Ireland. Every member of the community is affected

by this evil of unemployment, directly or indirectly. The employed workman has to bear treble taxation—firstly, by direct State insurance levy on worker; secondly, by tax contribution to State Unemployment Grant; thirdly, by subscription to his trade union, which is mainly expended on relief to the unemployed members of his respective union. The employer bears a dual taxation by State insurance tax and general tax contribution to State share of dole. To add to this we have to provide for costly Labour Exchanges. The monies thus wasted, if wisely expended on reproductive employment or works of public utility, would not alone reduce taxation but would uplift the moral and physical status of our Irish working class.

Measures to Abolish Unemployment.

In order to enter into a vigorous campaign against unemployment I would commandeer the splendid building known as the College of Science, which I would establish as the national centre for the scientific development of the agricultural and industrial resources of Ireland. With this object I would separate the present Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction into two distinct departments—one to be known as the Land and Waterways Development Department, the other as the Industrial and Commercial Development Department. I would also instal the Ministry of Labour within those capacious buildings, while the main building, devoted to the actual work of science teaching, would serve as an intermediary link, supplying the means for scientific investigation as to the likelihood of success of the several schemes promoted by the co-operation of each department. On the Ministries of Labour and Economics (now in existence) I would place the onus of removing the plague of unemployment. The following methods might be adopted as preliminaries:—(a) Obtaining, through the agency of the surveyors of each county council, a complete survey and report on all vacant and uncultivated lands in their respective districts, also all undeveloped mineral resources and waterways. (b) Obtaining similar returns from urban, municipal and trades councils, together with chambers of commerce, regarding industries deserving initiation, revival or expansion, in their respective areas. (c) Local and scientific investigation of the merits of such development schemes previous to approval by the Ministry of Economics. When such approval is signified State assistance shall be afforded by one or other of the following means:—

(1) The granting of State subventions or loans to industrial companies, co-operative societies, or responsible indivi-

duals who were prepared to carry such schemes into effect, the sum advanced being in a proportionate ratio to the number of ordinary workers employed, as distinguished from salaried staff. The development of bogs, mines, waterways and other natural resources could be thus carried into effect on ordinary commercial lines, free from political jobbery, and their value as national assets thoroughly explored. In all cases where State aid is thus afforded, especially in the matter of mineral resources, the right of the State to acquire sole ownership, if considered advisable, should be a cardinal condition for the obtaining of national aid.

(2) Affording financial assistance to local governing bodies who may be prepared to carry out approved schemes of local improvement or utility, though not of a directly reproductive character, on condition that such grant shall be based on a *pro capita* basis in accord with the numbers of ordinary workers engaged apart from managerial staff.

(3) Direct schemes of national development, such as establishment of co-operative colonies, compulsory land tillage, creation of small holdings, marketing centres, transport facilities, improvement of national waterways, exploration of mines, etc., where private capital is not available.

The work I have just suggested would mainly lie within the province of the Minister of Economics, who should be vested with the legislative authority sanctioning the use of financial powers in accordance with my proposals.

If the Ministry of Labour is to justify its existence it also must possess machinery and powers, both systematic and effective, for the proper organisation of labour, with a view to the provision of regular employment, regularisation of wages and conditions of labour, prevention of strikes and lock-outs, and responsibility for maintenance of workers and their dependents during periods of temporary unemployment. All legislative enactments for these objects must, however, enlist the goodwill and support of the workers, whose views will, I hope, secure direct expression in the new Irish Legislature. Subject to such considered opinion I would invoke for the Department of Labour the following powers:—

(1) The abolishing of Labour Exchanges—one of the most costly and inefficient pieces of official machinery ever invented.

(2) The compulsory enrolment of all workers in trade unions connected with their respective occupations, or, where unacceptable or unwilling, a union of miscellaneous workers.

(3) Transfer of functions carried out by managers of Labour Exchanges to secretaries of unions of workers.

(4) The creation of Workers' and Employers' Councils respectively in all industrial and agricultural areas, of which all employers of twelve workers and over, as also representatives of trade unions in district, shall be members.

(5) The establishment of Conciliation Courts, composed of panels of an equal number of representatives of District Workers' and Employers' Councils, respectively, presided over by an umpire mutually agreed upon, to whom all matters of dispute affecting the mutual interests of labour and capital shall be submitted for arbitration. Promoters of strikes or lock-outs to be liable to penalties if such dispute be not, in the first instance, submitted to the consideration of said courts.

(6) The regulation of juvenile labour and abolishing of employment of all children under 14 years. If the machinery of the present Juvenile Advisory Committee is kept in existence and their recommendations carried into effect the great highway leading to blind alley employment, physical degeneration and pauperism, will be closed to the children of the poor. Their recommendations are—(1) The necessity of ensuring regular attendance at school; (2) The raising of the school-leaving age; (3) The provision of compulsory continuation education for juvenile workers and co-ordination between primary and continuation education; (4) The establishment of day industrial schools for wayward and truant children.

Relief of Temporarily Necessitous Persons.

In regard to the provision of subsistence allowance for unemployed workers and their dependents, I would abandon the present insurance tax on worker and employer. Apart from the Government tax and dole, trade unionists have always voluntarily taxed themselves in support of their unemployed members. I would revert to these old conditions, and insist that an allowance of not less than £1 weekly be provided by trade unions for their unemployed members. In addition, the State should provide a statutory scale of allowances for each worker's dependent, disbursed through the agency of the trade union, subject to satisfactory vouchers being produced. Thus each trade union would, without the interference or expense of unnecessary officialdom, deal with its own members. By this means I would make the State the custodian of necessitous women and children, and in order to make the wealthy element of the community take a real interest in the welfare of the workers I would provide such dependent allowances from a capital levy on all funds accumulated in Irish banks. According to a recent eminent authority, over £210,000,000

lie to-day in Irish banks, which, if invested in the development of industries, would solve the problem of unemployment. It is only just therefore that those who possess such idle wealth should bear the burden of providing for the dependents of unemployed workers. One per cent. or two per cent. tax on those buried millions would do more to awaken the community to their duties to God's poor than all the preaching on pulpit or platform. Therefore I advocate this method both from economic and moral grounds, though it may be somewhat repugnant to many of my hearers. Measures such as those would quickly remove unemployment as a factor in the generation of poverty.

The secondary cause of *temporary poverty* may be ascribed to illness, which deprives the bread-winner of his earning powers and leaves himself and dependents destitute of the means of subsistence. Again, the State steps in with a maximum of taxation for a minimum of relief. The scale of sick allowance is so miserably inadequate that provident workers in anything approaching stable employment must pay again a treble tax, in the shape of subscription to a tontine or friendly society in order to secure the services of a doctor and a small auxiliary allowance to keep the wolf from the door: this at a time when costly nourishing diet is chiefly needed for the patient. And again, the employer also has to pay a dual tax, while wealthy non-employed members of the community escape with a fractional contribution to the State subsidy. If it were not for the magnificent services of the medical staffs of our Irish hospitals the lot of the sick worker would, in thousands of cases, be a sad one. Yet amidst the forty public hospitals of Dublin I believe only nine receive Government aid; and were it not for public benevolence and contributions from local governing bodies they might close their doors.

I consider that the time has arrived when the Irish Ministry of Public Health should evolve a scheme by which the money received under Medical Charities Acts, rates contributed to sanatoriums, hospitals, dispensaries, etc., health insurance funds, and all monies contributed for medical services, should be transferred to the control of Public Health Committees, appointed by the county and borough councils, acting with the advice and co-operation of the National Health Ministry. A more economic and efficient system could be thus evolved, and proper provision could thus be made for the dependents of workers during periods of illness, thus precluding incipient poverty, which so often creeps into the worker's home during such periods, and whose aftermath retards recovery and frequently brings relapse and death. To any appeal for support for a pro-

per medical service and real provision for the needs of workers and their dependents all organised workers would, I am certain, afford a willing response. While the erection of buildings might be left to private benevolence, I maintain that charity fêtes should be unnecessary to raise money for hospital support, but that the State and local authority should provide for their maintenance apart from all distinction of creed. In the Irish State I would hope that no sectional discrimination in the distribution of financial aid shall be adopted, such as has heretofore occurred. The only criterion should be their efficiency and services to those whom Christ loved best—the poor. Another phase of the poverty problem which is intimately connected with the illness of the worker is the tragedy which so often supervenes where the illness ends mortally and the widow and helpless children are left in absolute destitution, when separation, pauperisation and life desolation seem to be their future lot. I have dealt with this subject elsewhere, and Mr. Dickie has also addressed this Society regarding the solution adopted in the United States and elsewhere. Mothers' Pensions has proved its worth wherever in operation, by preserving under the fostering care of the mother and midst the sanctities of home the children of the nation, and thus enabling them to receive such training and care as will mould them into self-respecting citizens. This reform shall, I hope, one day be a part of the machinery of the Ministry of Health, and bear good fruit to the future Irish State.

I would like here to refer to a matter which presses heavily on our Christian poor in case of death—the cost and provision of interment expenses. This is usually provided for by Industrial Insurance. But any who have studied the many subterfuges by which the poor are bereft of their benefits, and the thousands of lapsed policies which go to the enrichment of directorates, will recognise that a reform is here needed. I see no reason why the Post Office should not enter into this business, whereby, by honest dealings, the State revenue would benefit, while the poor would be saved from the pangs of seeing their loved ones consigned to a pauper's grave. Our Cemetery Committees might also be less exacting in their burial fees, and might also mark the graves of the humble by a simple headstone, bearing the names of those interred in unbought grave plots. On all cemetery committees there should be representatives of labour to guard the interests of the dead and living poor.

Relief of Permanently Destitute Persons.

The care of the *permanently destitute* has heretofore been dealt with by Poor Law legislation, and 159 fortress-like build-

ings, bearing the misnomer of *work-houses*, have disfigured the Irish landscape with their darksome ugliness. Those Irish *bastilles* provided an easy competence for officialdom, luxurious lodgings for loafers, while the genuine decent poor were herded with the ne'er-do-well in the isolation of pauper prisonhood. Ireland's new birth has fortunately brought about the arrival of a reforming element on our public boards, who are opposed to this degrading system, and in consequence the number and costs of upkeep of those institutions have been largely reduced. Dublin Union alone has made a saving of £50,000 in one year.

Nevertheless, much still remains to be accomplished. A few flying columns of building trade workers ought to be provided with employment of a nationally reproductive character, in razing those gloomy structures and utilising the masonry to erect cottage homes for the aged and infirm, where freedom, flowers, and human friendship would brighten their declining years. A small local rate added to the old age pensions would easily provide this reform for those without immediate relatives, while the children of old age pensioners, possessed of sufficient means, should be compelled to contribute in such cases. A co-operative canteen, where profiteering was unknown, together with a male and female superintendent, would, in the majority of instances, serve the needs of the members of those old age colonies, and thus dispense with another element of costly administration. A large number of trade unions provide superannuation grants and annuities for their members. Such funds would also be available in lieu of, or as a supplement to, old age pensions for the purposes referred to. Rural colonies for blind workers, assisted by the Pensions for the Blind, could also be organised on similar lines, where the wicker-work and basket-making industries could be carried on in healthy and comfortable surroundings, instead of in the slum cellars, where to-day many of those sadly stricken creatures eke out a miserable existence.

The internecine war in Ireland, together with the Great European War, has left a sad legacy of maimed and nerve-stricken men in our midst. The majority of those are comparatively youthful, and in any financial settlement as to their respective responsibilities in this matter by the Irish and British Governments I would hope that those men will secure trustworthy advocates. The cost of their care and maintenance should not be allowed to become a burden on the rates. Every effort should be made to make them self-supporting, where possible, but an Irish Ministry of Pensions should be retained permanently to deal with those cases, on whom all such responsibility should solely rest. This Ministry should deal with the

cases affecting Republican as well as Imperial forces, and the machinery at present in existence is, I believe, fairly effective for its objects. In the necessitous cases I have just dealt with supplementary aid is at present available from different sources, while in other instances popular opinion has indicated how those problems should be dealt with.

Child Welfare Proposals.

There remains still to be dealt with that section of the community of whom the ratepayer must ever remain the benevolent guardian. Amongst the helpless destitute, children claim first consideration. The adoption of State Pensions for Widowed Mothers would largely reduce this local burden. The remainder would consist of children without surviving parents or whose forbears were of a degenerate character. But in no instance should a child be confined within the walls of a pauper institution. Such cases should be dealt with by fosterage in rural homes or placed in charge of religious communities, under the care of a Child Welfare Committee. The care of illegitimate children would demand delicate circumspection, and unless the mother was an actual degenerate I would not deprive her of the companionship and affection of her child. I believe the human affection thus preserved would be a determining factor in her redemption, if aided by Christian sympathy and assistance. The words of the Divine Master, "*He* who is without sin let *him* cast the first stone," should be remembered in all such cases. The ostracism of friend and relatives has often driven a first offender to the lowest paths of infamy. Neither should children be punished for the sins of their parents. Though divine law may carry those penalties, human laws should not deprive natural children of their rights as citizens, as the sin of origin was not of their volition. An Irish Legislature will, I hope, remove such civil disabilities, and deal with the repentant and erring woman in a way that she also will obey the tender order of Divine Mercy: "Go, thou, and sin no more." As to children of poor parents suffering from impairment of physical or mental faculties likely to lead to life-long dependency, compulsory powers should be afforded to the Ministry of Public Health to deal with those cases at an early stage by medical and educational methods, with a view to complete cure before reaching adult age. Absence of regular nourishing meals during school hours has led to ill effects amongst many working-class children. The new Ministry of Education should provide school meals for all children in primary schools at a low cost, the same to be recoverable from

parents having sufficient means, or, failing this, children should be allowed, as in England, one and a half hours for meals at home at mid-day. An effective Compulsory Education Act would also be an admirable auxiliary in rescuing tramp children from the vicissitudes of their life of ignorance and misery.

Miscellaneous Relief Cases.

For the able-bodied vagrants and unemployables who form the adult pauper population, certain specified relief works should be organised of a nature which would not compete with regular labour and which would recoup the ratepayers the monies spent on their maintenance, but work should be enforced as a condition of relief for all such social parasites. As to the temporary indigent decent members of the community not provided for in my suggestions for unemployment relief, whose numbers would be infinitesimal, I would refer them to the kindly assistance of the officers of the St. Vincent de Paul or Roomkeepers' Society or other charitable organisations of their district, who would advise them as to future action, but in the absence of such associations or their inability to act the Public Assistance Authority should treat all such indigent cases on lines leading to self-help, outside of poor law institutions, and as far as possible in their own homes. All asylums and hospitals attached to poor law unions should be transferred to the Minister of Public Health, controlled by local committees, and financed in the manner I have already mentioned. These few brief notes do not in any degree represent a comprehensive view of a subject which has such direct bearing on the future era of national reconstruction. The guiding principles I have held in view in all propositions herein contained are those embodied in the Majority Report of the Royal Poor Law Commission, 1909, which were as follows:—

(1) That the treatment of the poor who apply for public assistance should be adapted to the needs of the individual, and, if institutions, should be governed by classification.

(2) That the public administration established for the assistance of the poor should work in co-operation with the local and private charities of the district.

(3) That the system of public assistance thus established should include processes of help, which would be preventive, curative and restorative.

(4) That every effort should be made to foster the instincts of independence and self-maintenance amongst those assisted.